

‘Working for the building’: An Interview with Ben Wheatley

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Ben Wheatley’s *High-Rise* opened earlier this year, garnering praise, bemusement and opprobrium in roughly equal measure. Some critics perceive a lack of fidelity to the novel, while others attack the film for misogyny. Still others hail it as a thoroughly Ballardian triumph.

In this exclusive interview, Jamie Sherry speaks to Wheatley about the process of adapting the film, Wheatley’s attraction to Ballard, and his working relationship with scriptwriter and editor Amy Jump.

Welcome to the *High-Rise*.

In terms of adaptation, what drew you towards *High-Rise*, compared to any of Ballard’s works?

When I first read it as a teenager it fitted in very neatly with themes that I was interested in anyway, certainly to do with society collapsing and people’s responses to that. I also really liked *Mad Max*, and I was reading a lot of SF comics like *2000 AD* which was swirling around at the same time as I was reading Ballard and *High-Rise* specifically. The first ever edition of *2000 AD* I read was ‘Block Mania’ (1981) which has so many themes relevant to *High-Rise*, and so for me it was the perfect primer for reading Ballard. It would be easy to see it as a *High-Rise* for kids, but actually for what it is, *2000 AD* is extremely sophisticated. But I think there are many similar themes in the comic, which thinking back now, would have come out only about six years after the novel, so that for me was very interesting.

The building itself is a real achievement of design. I imagine it was very important that you got that right.

Many people feel like they want to live in the building, and they quite like it until “all the weird shit happens” which I think is surprising, but enjoyable. Myself and Mark Tildesley (production designer) spent a lot of time making sure that the building looked and felt real, but we also did not want it to be a parody of Brutalist architecture. It was important that it wasn’t filled with elements of the 70s that have become clichés, like circular televisions and 70s crockery, and the men wearing ridiculous flares and kipper ties. We wanted to be of the time but also out of time. One of the things we wanted was this idea that the 70s never existed in isolation. All houses have furniture that dates back to previous decades so we didn’t want the contents to be only of that time. We wanted it to avoid it looking quintessentially 70s. But there are cultural echoes in the building – with references to cinema and television of that period.

Then we had practical considerations such as the fact that in the script there are conversations from balcony to balcony. I think we made assumptions about how that would function visually. I stayed in a very Brutalist hotel in Slovakia but when I went out onto the balcony I realised that this doesn’t work at all because it would be heads popping out. It was an awful wake-up call. So, we did storyboards and we started to see the building like a hand, with the towers like the fingers, and the swimming pool wrapping around it like a pond or a palm of the hand. We realised that having the towers slightly bent made it look like a hand coming out of the ground. So the fingers created these sloping balconies, and characters could actually interact between them. For us it was initially a technical necessity, but quickly it starts to affect the aesthetics of the building as well.

Laing’s apartment is completely bare, and the concrete is very apparent. It’s also sparse, with just the photograph of his dead sister on the wall, and some squares where he has tested paint. But you get a strong sense of the building by observing his room.

The building is literally *in* the room. Mark and I felt that we wanted the structure of the building to come into people’s space, to infiltrate their normal lives. That came about because I stayed in a hotel in Sweden and there was this large pillar in the middle of the room. So the building was impinging on the room, which they were making available at cheapest rate. It was like they didn’t give a fuck about the people staying in there, with no forethought to comfort. But for me it’s important that the film isn’t seen as a critique of Brutalist architecture. The building itself is a metaphor, and although it has a presence it is more about the characters and how they react to it, and the choices they make.

So, no worries at all?

Well, the thing is, and this might sound ridiculous, but I didn’t really think about the audience at all, until the time came to actually show the film to other people. It’s difficult because it could go either way, and all we can do is adapt the book and make the film that we are happy with. There was no other agenda in terms of how we adapted the novel, no snidiness or ill-will, and so I always felt that the end product would work.

The problem with book adaptations, I suppose, is that even in a short novel like this there is still a lot of detail that simply cannot be included, or no way to communicate it to audiences. Something written down that fills you with fear, awe, and disgust is one thing, but when that is transposed onto the screen and we see it in the flesh it becomes something else entirely. I think that’s the main problem, and perhaps where books get bent out of shape in adaptation.

Over the years you have amassed a core crew of people that you seem very loyal to, and who you use on each film project, not just Amy but also Laurie Rose (DoP) and Nick Gillespie (camera)? Was Jeremy happy with this relinquishing of control?

Yes, I do have a lot of crew that have come into this after working on my films, which is an approach I like. So yes, I brought in Laurie and Nick, but also Anita the script editor, and then of

course Amy and I edited the film. So there is a core crew of people that have moved from film to film. Jeremy was completely happy with this. He was there for most of the filming, but he had the lightest of touches in terms of creative or technical decisions, and mainly he was just very encouraging, which is what he needed him to be.

Yes, people may not be aware that you have directed commercials, and I wonder if that has affected your filmmaking.

Firstly, it's massively helpful, and allows directors to work and live and pursue projects that either do not get off the ground, or allow them work in that early planning phase when there is no actual money around. I've directed commercials for many years, which has not only been financially helpful but also gave me a really good grounding for something like *High-Rise*. People have asked how this bloke who makes small films for little money, a lot of it handheld, could cope with something of the size of *High-Rise*, in terms of camerawork and money management. My answer is that I have been doing that sort of thing for years.

Jeremy Thomas mentioned that you watched Ridley Scott's commercials as research for *High-Rise*? Did you do this together, or just talk about it?

I wanted to look those up for personal reasons amongst many. Scott talks about that work on commercials as being the basis for much of the work that he eventually did on *Blade Runner*, *Alien* and *Dune* – he spoke about how he had done over a thousand adverts during the 1970s. I had seen a lot of the key adverts but I'd not seen all of them, and I wanted to see what he was producing prior to those films. I find that really fascinating, and not just because I shoot adverts. He was obviously projecting a future 1970s himself – a kind of glamorous 70s that never really existed. It tapped into that nostalgia for a 1970s which resulted in optimistic, nostalgic messages about Britain, exemplified by Scott's famous Hovis advert.

That advert is made in 1973, just out of the 60s, and just a couple of years before *High-Rise* itself. A time of great optimism, the vast majority of which was misplaced.

It was a past that never existed and did not reflect a future Britain either. I found that very relevant to what we were doing with *High-Rise*. The thing about Scott is that those advertisements were so incredibly expensive that if you had the same pro-rata budget for a feature film, it would take you about a year to shoot it, whereas Scott is spending 2-3 days to shoot 30secs of advert, and it would cost a fortune. Those 70s adverts are the budget equivalent of *Star Wars* or more – so you can't really replicate the look of it as it is produced within an advertising bubble.

Why did you decide to film in Bangor, Northern Ireland – and did it have an effect on the film?

There has been a cull of Brutalist buildings, and some of the best ones are constantly used, such as the Barbican, or some Universities. We tried to use Birmingham Library, but we couldn't and they knocked it down. Amy looked around the Docklands but couldn't find anything suitable. So going to Bangor was partially based in necessity. We were lucky that we were able to find locations such as the swimming pool in this abandoned leisure centre that was across from a police station so wasn't vandalised. It also had squash courts, a gym, five-a-side football pitch. It also had two basketball courts with high ceilings that we could use to build sets. And the Stena terminal which was a massive space that we could use to create rooms. We also found an empty supermarket that wasn't being used, so that fell into our laps as well.

The actors were staying in a hotel which meant they needed cabs to the set, and some people were based in Belfast. But myself and others were in a house on the sea-front which was like *The Young Ones* house by the end of filming [laughs]. We would shoot and then I would edit the film in the evenings – there was absolutely no social life outside of the film, we were very much in a bubble.

The area has also become a popular place to make film and television.

Jeremy was quite frank about this the other day, in terms of filming in Northern Ireland because of tax breaks. But also there is a massive amount of skilled technicians there because of the renaissance they are having there with *Game of Thrones*, and various films. But also, we couldn't find a building better than the one we sourced in Bangor. We didn't use a studio, but we basically developed our own studio space.

Royal's roof garden was actually shot in a garden in Bangor which Mark Tildesley the production designer found almost by accident wandering around the city. That made a huge difference to the film, when we first saw it we were struck by how much it was like the garden in *Last Year in Marienbad* – it was incredible. At that point our budget would not allow us to create a space like that so it was a massively helpful find, and works very well.

I don't believe that you have made a film adaptation. What for you has been the process of adapting Ballard's novel – how did this project differ from your previous films in terms of the creative process?

On the one hand it gives you something unambiguous and centred – there is this story and structure that is already mapped out. So that element that is always such a struggle in the early stages of making a film is gone. It also gives you an audience, which is a brilliant starting point, and a comfortable place to be for an independent filmmaker. But conversely, it also gives you some aggravation because the normal processes of changing and amending are constrained by the book. So, there is an extra level of anxiety. What you don't want to happen is the erosion of the book, or for it to disappear, or to anger people. In our films normally if something doesn't work we just get rid of it either at script stage, during filming, or in the edit. But you can't with this so much, because every moment that you have taken from the novel is there for a reason. But what I liked about adapting the novel is that it forces you into a rhythm and a structure that I wouldn't normally think of. So, in traditional film storytelling terms you have the three or four act structure, where the character realises something in the second act, and then has survive and learns something by the end. Not to be glib, but that is a proven structure that audiences seem to like. But in *High-Rise* that is not really possible as it is not structured like that at all. Laing simply does act like a traditional Hollywood hero. In fact, neither does Wilder, Royal, Charlotte or any of them really. Being in that alien territory is really exciting and new for me and is simply not something I would conjure out of thin air. That element of character might be frustrating for audiences but it's there in the novel and I wanted to retain it.

What were some of the main aspects of the novel that you were especially keen to retain or underline?

I think we sweated over that intangible Ballardian quality of the novel. So, to keep Laing as a Ballardian 'hero' was really important, as well as trying to attain that tone that is difficult to describe, but you know it when you read or see it. Not only that, but it's a slippery concept in itself. His detachment, and the way Laing observes without really getting involved is troublesome for film. The temptation was there to make him more proactive and to get him more involved in the main plot points, but we didn't want to do that. So to keep that element of *High-Rise* was really fundamental. We always wanted Laing to be someone observing and computing events, rather than initiating anything, or actively kicking off various incidents. He is a by-stander and although he does take part, he does not actively attempt to force an escalation of violence. The narrative really seems to offer up disappointment – we learn about these characters and then there actions and reactions disappoint us. When I think about what I would do in that situation, it wouldn't be anything other than completely cowardly and venal [laughs].

You retain a Ballardian theme of reconstruction and artifice. We see Royal's recreated, quintessential Britishness on the top floor, perhaps a reference to the Britain recreated in

Shanghai during Ballard's childhood. And I like the use of Wilder's filming and the projections.

We knew we were going to use Wilder making his documentary about the building, but then with the multiple projections the *High-Rise* starts actually becoming like Youtube, with rooms for viewing what is happening around them. There is also the TV series within the film. Even though we only see a little bit of it, that was a actually a fully formed TV concept called *The Bastard of Dansford* set in a stately home in which a philanderer has to deal with one of his bastards turning up. But that use of filming needed to be confined to the building. This was why both Amy and I felt that this had to happen in the 70s because if it was set now we would have people sharing images and video on social media.

You seem to have arrived at a very mutual and productive working relationship with Amy, where she is writing and editing, and you are directing and editing also. How does it work?

Our working process is unusual, maybe. How I work with Amy is not me flicking through the book and then giving notes to her. It was far more independent that. Amy had the book, so she went and wrote the script, and then she then presented it me. She is a much better writer than me, so even if I'm not sure about something she has written, I will always come around to it. The first time I read the script, when I was allowed to read it, it took my breath away. It is brilliant writing.

Amy also edits with you, which is unusual for a screenwriter.

There is that saying that "the edit is the last draft of the script" but usually the screenwriter is not present for the edit. So for me there is something really powerful about that. So it is an interesting process, I think, where in the editing room I become like a technician operating the machinery and she tells me what to do, similar to a Director. The hierarchy works differently and the notion of an auteur theory goes out of the window. A writer who is also an editor has almost the same power as the Director.

You have spoken about how Amy wanted to access the 'hidden stories' in *High-Rise*, specifically the women and children characters. This is one of the aspects of the film I most enjoy, that Amy has amplified these elements of the novel.

I suppose every book has this potential, to a degree. But *High-Rise* definitely feels like a book that has deliberately bracketed off one story, controlled by the narrator, but there are these other stories under the surface that are alluded to in quite subtle terms, and at other times glaringly obvious. The way that the book ends with the women arriving and killing Wilder, in some ways it feels like it comes out of nowhere, from left field. But then if you re-read it you realise it is happening all the way through, these women and children are present and are active. It's almost as if the arrogance of the male characters, and the high-rise itself, and the book, won't allow us to fully see these characters that are so important to the story. I like that a lot, and it's one of the big strengths of Amy's script.

It becomes quite personal I suppose inasmuch as Amy and I were born in the early 70s so we were the same age as the children in the building, which I think affected how Amy wrote those characters and Toby in particular. Extending that, the adults are more like our parents so we were dealing with what that generation means to us, rather than what that generation is.

It adds so many extra elements, especially Helen Wilder, and Toby, but feels organic. Like the stories are there, but the narrator has by-passed them.

It gives extra weight to the story, and allows for a big ensemble cast which I think shows them punching much higher as characters than the lines they have been given. They seem much more important. So someone like Helen Wilder is really fascinating. Amy had written this thing into the script that there are secret routes of communication through the building which I think is notable when you read it. I really love the way that, for instance, Laing talks to Helen and he tells her that

he plays squash. And then shortly afterwards, Royal says to Laing “so you play squash?” which is quite throwaway if you don’t think about it. But, how would he know that? Helen talks to Charlotte, we know that. And so we can deduce that Charlotte talks to Royal, which is our first clue of a connection between them. But for me, rather than just tracking lines of communication I think of it more like a synapse has fired up the building which, if you think of it on a larger scale, there are these conversations happening all the time which again fly around the brain of the building like synaptic pulses.

And for me sound really helps with that. I felt like there was this kind of echoing effect in the building, through the various trash chutes and air ducts. So it starts to feel somewhat sentient, like HAL 9000 minus the voice. The building is organic, nobody is spying on anyone, but the psychogeographical layout of the building allows for, or even encourages, these connections.

In that respect there is a life beyond the scenes we are showing you. In that respect I particularly like the journey of Digby the dog, who has his own story.

Poor Digby!

[laughs] Yes. But I like that scene when he is watching the cleaner scrubbing his own shit out of the carpet, and then later you see him at the party he goes into the lift, so he is present in so many of the scenes. He spends so much of the film looking around the building. He enters the shaft in much the same way as Wilder, and Laing’s apartment. He has quite a detailed character arc in that sense. He’s also a survivor like Helen Wilder, he is abused, mistreated, and then he manages to latch onto Laing, who murders him. His trust is broken, and ultimately he has a tragic story.

In general, there is a lot of dog action in the film, including the swimming pool revolt scene. They become a symbol, or a touchstone for the descent of the characters, who become able to eat dogs not just through necessity, but also because their moral barometers are so transformed.

To a British audience, it is shocking to see how they are treated. For me it became important when we were researching the film to get that anatomically correct. Not just for the dog scenes, but also the scenes with Laing in his workplace. We spoke to a pathologist, and Tom visited a real autopsy. The pathologist said that the problem of representing bodies and corpses on screen is that in one moment they look like humans, and then they can look like a bad special effect. It is confusing for the brain to process this, we are programmed to read faces and gain emotion from that. As soon as that is broken they emotionally and psychologically become an object of sorts. That is a crisis for the mind to process. I find it’s the same shift with the dogs, so that they are either your friend, or they are lunch. Once you cross that line, it feels like it is a threshold that they won’t come back from.

There has been some discussion of the decision to retain the 1970s setting of the novel in your film. I assume that was something you always wanted to do? Fay and Bea Ballard attended the Ballard Study Day at the British Library and Bea was on stage with you for the Q&A. She seemed especially happy with the 70s setting, and the stylised feel of the film.

I think if we had set it during any other time too many elements would have to be removed, or there is a chance that it could have simply become too disconnected from the novel. There is a danger that the bare bones of the plot are retained and you end up with something that is essentially just an action movie. For me, to get to that point means you may as well just make another film entirely, as it would become just so fundamentally different.

Right, otherwise why adapt it all, other than for the marketing associations that come with adapting a novel in terms of a ready-made audience?

Exactly. The specificity of the novel really fucks with the ability to set it now. So many elements are apposite for now, but I think that setting it in the past, or a future idea of the past, allows us to say things about now and our contemporary society that we would be far too on-the-nose. It is logistical and technical as well as aesthetic. Just simple things, like finding an area close to London that could be also remote would so tricky if it was set now.

Some of the same issues arose with Cronenberg's resituating of *Crash* to Toronto, Canada. I adore Cronenberg's film, but as someone who grew up on the streets of Ballard's *Crash* it was hard not to wish for it to have been set there as well. I think setting *High-Rise* in the future would also have raised difficult questions.

Amy and I went into this with the idea that if we are going to adapt a book, which I have never done before, then we should fully mine the book for every element you can take from it, and whatever you can make work. It's not like the book is this inconvenience, or an obstacle to the making of the film. You can't just take the title, and then suddenly you have something that is vaguely famous that you can latch your own story onto. Even though Amy changed sections and certain elements of the novel, and there were specific parts that we did not want to include for various reasons, in the front of our minds was always this concept that we were adapting the *book*. Ballard's novel. That was crucial. It wasn't about how we could meet the demands of the book, but rather how the book meets us.

It's a conflation, presumably, of a number of things. The year of publication, and location wise, even though the book is set in East London, it is Ballard's famous Shepperton that is influencing the press releases to mention the West of London, even though now we have aspirational high-rise developments in the East of London that evoke Ballard's *High-Rise* in a most profound way.

The book is probably talking about a near future, perhaps 1979, or even into the 1980s. So it's more like an alternative reality that sits underneath the main narrative timeline. What happens in the book does not happen in real life, naturally. From our vantage point now we can see the 1970s in its totality, even though those truths are different for different people. So this is an alternative, notional idea of the 1970s, as explored in the book. *High-Rise* is a SF film but it's also a period film – so it's about the 70s, and now, and into the future. I think the 70s is SF and the last time there was social optimism about the future. We don't have that now, in fact society's view of the future has become bleak and dystopian.

The Margaret Thatcher quotation that you use at the end of the film is quite surprising, it seems to anchor the film in the real world after two-hours or so of seeing things that do not necessarily correlate to the real 1970s (in a literal sense). You are emphasising that the film is a threshold to a new period, and alluding to the damaging effects of free-market capitalism.

Firstly, you have to get over the shock of hearing Thatcher's voice. What I really loved about that when I read Amy's script originally was that it was really chilling to me. I find Thatcher really scary. But we also wanted to place the film in a loop. Typical dystopian narratives seem to revolve around a resolution of trying start again, to resurrect civilisation through farming etc. But *High-Rise* ends with the idea that we are moving into the 1980s.

The winter of discontent is over and a new optimism is forming, based around wealth and aspiration.

Yes, and a new bunch of Royals, Laings, Wilders and Charlottes will come to the fore. Nothing changes, really, it is a cycle and that pattern will repeat itself, as we are seeing now. So for me, the voice of Thatcher is almost like this monster which is stalking the land and is coming for them,

but they don't realise what it means yet. Toby doesn't know what will happen, but we do. She exists around the *High-Rise* like an airborne virus, or radiation working like radio waves to infect the population. Toby has lost his parents, and then he finds this new, political parent through his home-made transistor device. It's beaming right into his head.

It may also be difficult for people to understand or remember that violence was pervasive in British society during the 70s. In an interview for *Sightseers* you mention that "civilisation is wafer thin, and underneath we are savage islanders." Were you considering *High-Rise* at the time?

Not consciously, although I actually more see *A Field in England* and *High-Rise* as companion pieces, with a strong connection to each other. They are both dealing with pivotal points in British history, but personally 1975 for me stands as this mid-point between the war years, and the modern period, however you want to define that. I think that each character in the film are like parts of the body, similar to Laing's anatomical view of the building. And these parts are all fighting over the psyche of that space and film. For me that is as true for *High-Rise* as it is for *A Field in England*.

You also seem happier to deal with the technical aspects of the film, rather than thematic interpretation.

Precisely, I am much happier talking about the technical aspects of the filmmaking process than answering questions about symbolism and subtext. I suppose it is a defence mechanism, and I'm much more comfortable considering the film in those terms when questioned in public. But that also comes from various fallacies about how filmmaking works. In the last few months a lot of the interviewers I have spoken to seem preoccupied with the chaos in the film, and how this might have been replicated in the process of making it. People ask, "Are the drinks real? Did the actors really take drugs, did Tom and Sienna really have sex?" And, the answer is of course no they did not. It's astonishing.

Maybe it's from watching too many making-of documentaries like *Hearts of Darkness*, *Burden of Dreams* and *Lost in La Mancha*. How would you even get a film like this made under those circumstances?

It's impossible, and also incredibly dangerous. Films can't really be made like that anymore, and you wouldn't be allowed to anyway due to Health and Safety guidelines. You can't even ask an actor to stand on a chair without it adhering to numerous guidelines.

Finding comparisons and trying to see references, which I do a lot, is also borne of vanity, isn't it? Finding cultural references as a way to demonstrate knowledge of certain canonical films?

Well, the easy way of talking about *High-Rise* would be to categorise it and explain it as one single entity, but I don't feel it is any one thing. For me the novel moves very rapidly through a number of different types of narrative, one after the other. *High-Rise* gets categorised as Class War, which it kind of is for a split second, and then it isn't again. That's what I felt when I re-read the book, that Ballard is compressing a lot of stories very quickly into one novel. A lot of that for me was confounding your expectation of the story, or assumptions about what Ballard was trying to do from the point of view of theme and genre.

When I read the novel I made a lot of those assumptions, and so my irritation with how others choose to interpret my film from quite a narrow and position is informed by my own misinterpretation of the novel, and my need to back-track and unpack each element as I was reading it. When I came back to it I thought the novel was like *Metropolis* with the working-classes on the bottom and the upper-classes on top, which it plainly is not.

Well, the initial, viral advert for *High-Rise* plays out like an advertisement for the building for prospective buyers, and certainly seemed to evoke the opening section of *Shivers*, as noted in Simon's comparative piece for Ballardian. The Cronenberg connection also seems to support the comparison.

Maybe you can tell me about this, because I've never managed to get to the bottom of it. *Shivers* is released in 1975 and *High-Rise* is published in the same year, and there does appear to be a grey area regarding which came first, and whether there was any influence either way. People do say they came out at the same time, but *Shivers* is so very close to *High-Rise* in so many ways, it feels to me like there must have been some kind of cross-over, or one of them was aware of the other.

My understanding, as you point out, is that the two were produced in isolation to each other. This is a subject that interests me, where culture operates like 'convergent evolution', in which two species develop in similar ways despite being independent of each other. It's certainly possible that Cronenberg heard about the novel, although that seems unlikely – plus the amount of time it took to develop and make the film suggests that it was developed prior to 1975. But Ballard was also working on his novel for some time as well.

I rewatched it recently, having seen it as a kid. The only difference I can really see of any significance is that Cronenberg uses a kind of b-movie conceit of the sex parasites as an excuse for the increasing breakdown of the characters in the film. We had the same issue when adapting *High-Rise* in those early days, when we realised that there isn't anything explicit explained in the book for the start of the breakdown. So you have to take a leap of faith with the narrative. From an adaptation perspective, the lack of motivation really does not seem to be much a problem in the novel, but with the film you are asking something more of the audience. In many ways it is inherently silly if you think about it, but if you can go with it, then you ease into it and you are fine.

Coming back to your use of sound, I think sound design is something particularly evident in all your films, but I think it is especially noticeable in *High-Rise*. Clint Mansell's score really seems to explore the psychology of the building. For me it is subliminal on first viewing, and then on repeat viewings it starts to have this extra life.

Absolutely! For me sound is half of filmmaking. Clint's score is fantastic, I could not be happier about that. I just contacted him on Twitter and I never thought he would be up for it – but he was and the work he produced is marvellous. With Clint, what I love about his music is that he has a real mastery of melody, but underneath that is a strong sense of tension and discordant sounds. It's hard to talk about this without sounding like a music journalist from the 90s talking about the "cathedral of sound". I don't think of myself in the same orbit as someone like him, but as it turned out he is a really approachable and lovely guy.

There are a lot of interesting song choices in the film as well: Can, Tangerine Dream, Abba, Portishead, The Fall. Naturally Abba are of the time, and Portishead covering them gives it a suitably retro-futurist tone. But the use of Krautrock is really interesting to me, especially at Charlotte's party. It reminded me Chris Petit's great Ballardian film *Radio On* and its use of 1970s music, in particular Kraftwerk and Bowie's German version of 'Heroes'.

I'm a big krautrock fan – in *Sightseers* I use it quite a lot, including Neu!, Amon Düül, Harmonia. I love it, and the meaning of it for me is very particular. It really confronts this idea or fallacy that British new wave music in the post-punk period was somehow completely original, and electronica was something invented in England. It's such bullshit, and even after that with a band like The Happy Mondays, especially the production on *Bummed*. The first time someone played me Can they asked if I had heard it before and I was "damn, yes I have" [laughs]. It's another classic example of our merry Island believing that we innovated something, and we are the centre of the universe, when in fact some of the most interesting stuff produced in the UK that we are proud of was actually produced ten years before in Germany.

The use of Abba's 'S.O.S.' is very unusual in that we never actually hear the original song in any form.

Abba was written into the script by Amy, and we wanted it to be prominent. I suppose that started with *Sightseers* and the use of specific songs that have a particular function. Actually, this came about because of something Amy has been looking into regarding how fake memories are formed in cinema. The film partly plays like a trick that makes you think you have had memories that are not real. The reoccurring use of music has an effect on the brain which processes sound differently to speech or visual stimulus. So you slowly realise that the orchestral arrangement at the party is Abba's S.O.S., but there are no vocals. And then later on the Portishead cover gives you the lyrics of the song, but the tune is very different, and the brain processes that, creating a memory of hearing Abba.

As well as sound, your films have some fingerprints on them, even though they are trying to do something different in terms of storytelling and genre. I noticed that your films often have a set-piece, slow-motion montage scene. You have this on a number of occasions in *High-Rise* when we get a montage with disparate images and macro shots, and then there is the killing of Wilder. You clearly like using these.

Actually, I like that kind of thing a lot. I think it is exhilarating as an audience member to experience that. I like to use a large variety of shots in those moments, and for audiences that can be alarming and difficult. I don't tend to use traditional montages which are designed to compress time or to show them becoming good at something, like lifting weights etc, and then dissolving into little vignettes and stories, before we are back in the developed story. I use the techniques of what people call montage to provoke the audience to think about disparate seemingly unconnected moments or shots. I think Ballard's casual third-person reporting often features something that in literary terms is quite close to montage, with sentences that carry vast amounts of plotting, with allusions to numerous characters and events. I was aware of that when reading *High-Rise*, but a lot of this comes from Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974), and particularly the moment when Frady goes to the Parallax Corporation and watches that insane indoctrination film, where it cuts between images and words like 'mother', 'country', 'god', 'enemy.' It's so brilliant and that's where I'm coming from with some of those montages. For me it is where image and film becomes most close to music, with the repetition of refrains, and use of repeated patterns in a rhythmic way. People actually get quite cross about them and consider montage as a dirty word, and I think there's a received wisdom that montages are bad filmmaking. As if the filmmakers are giving up on the story, or a lazy compression of time. It's just another taste issue.

The symbolism of his tie has extra resonance when rewatching the film and seeing him happily removing it and flinging it over the side of the building. It feels like he has been reborn, and is now happy to move on from so many thing, including his sister's suicide.

He becomes his own person. The tracking of the character's clothes is really important to the film. Laing visually becomes younger as he goes through the film, almost like he's regressing. He starts to have his trousers pulled up like shorts and his shirt gets smaller like he's in prep school. The tie becomes really important, and the tightening of it is his protection, and the clothes become like an armour. Once he gets rid of his tie he can move on, and start to be someone else, which is where the film ends.

There is that Orson Welles quote which goes "If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story." I think Laing is free, but only for so long. The women have taken over, but they have only dealt with Pangbourne's group, so who do they focus on next. It's very telling, and you realise that Steele's group has to be next. This story will just keep continuing and returning. It's a moment of comfort for Laing, and freedom, but there is something around the corner that is just as problematic, or worse. I'm not sure I would describe that as a positive

worldview though. I don't think of it as a dystopian story, but rather a new society forms and collapses, and then that will continue, repeated in cycles.